Departments

POINT OF VIEW

Beyond Image and Icon: History's Bounty at the Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site

Ever since Linda Brown walked with her father to Sumner Elementary School in the fall of 1950, the nation has been captivated by the image of a little girl turned away by a stern principal from the neighborhood grade school that her friends attended. This event brought attention to their status in a color-based society and exclusion from the group that dominated it. The incident represented the time in the lives of all African-American children when they became aware that American society, at large, identified them primarily by their race and secondarily as an inferior minority. The story and images of Oliver and Linda Brown's humiliating experience were shown repeatedly in the mid-1950s and during every May beyond that, in hopes that the cruelty of prejudice could be understood somehow by those who never felt its sting. If a little girl and her father could function as innocuous exemplars of their people, then perhaps they could dispel some of the negative stereotypes commonly associated with African Americans.[1]

Because it froze a seminal event in time, this powerful image became a popular American icon that characterized prejudice and discrimination. U.S. history includes several popular figures whose names and faces have become synonymous with momentous events, including Crispus Attucks, Dred Scott, Homer Plessy, Rosa Parks, and Oliver and Linda Brown. Such important figures have achieved symbolic status over time, representing far more than the single historical event in which they participated. Their stories are critical to a full understanding of this nation's history, but sometimes present a too-homogenized view of past events. Like myths and fables, historical icons serve valuable social purposes because they represent broad-sweeping trends and movements, serving as readily-identifiable forms for a wide spectrum of events and feelings. The picture of Linda Brown launched a national revolution for the equalization of civil liberties and equal justice to end a society that based status and opportunity on race. The image of this child provided a powerful symbol which may have facilitated the equalization of rights by defusing many irrational white fears of angry, faceless African Americans.

The Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site, a new unit in the National Park System, marks recent attempts by public historians to come to terms with complex aspects of race relations in the United States. Comprised of Monroe Elementary School and its adjacent playgrounds in Topeka, Kansas, the park represents both historical fiction and irrefutable fact, refraction, and reality regarding the long struggle that ended segregated public education. During its period of significance from 1950 to 1955, Monroe Elementary School exemplified a formal institution which captured a fundamental shift in American society and politics, and as a community center where African Americans could define, express, and sustain their cultural values. It provides a comprehensive, dynamic instructional tool which incorporates the **messy** processes of change, not merely its benchmarks, by examining incremental stages and individual actors.

Monroe received national attention in the mid-1950s as the representative "black" school that Linda Brown attended because, as an African American, state law and local school board policy denied her access to the nearby Sumner Elementary, reserved for white youth. Linda Brown's picture encapsulated a variety of personalities and events associated with the acquisition of equality in education. But this popular image has masked the necessary complexity of history, for Linda was not alone. Twenty children, represented in the litigation by twelve mothers and one father, were dispersed among Topeka's four "black" elementary schools. These minor plaintiffs largely remain anonymous because Linda Brown functions as the symbol for them, as well as students in four companion cases. These class action suits, by extension, represented all African Americans in each respective jurisdiction. The lone Monroe School became the focal point because of its association with Linda Brown. Its physical plant and faculty, in fact, far surpassed the inferior facilities that prompted litigation in the companion cases.

The course of events commonly known as *Brown* involved a

complex mix of social currents, federal proceedings, extensive litigation, and direct action by individuals and groups. Under the successive leadership of Charles Hamilton Houston and Thurgood Marshall, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) enacted a well planned legal campaign to end racial segregation in graduate and professional education. Co-counsel from the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) offices in New York oversaw the coordination of many cases. Through the 1930s and 1940s, litigation by a very talented group of counselors in federal and county courts chipped away at the "separate but equal" doctrine in higher education. Social scientists and legal scholars provided substantive proof of the inherent unconstitutionality of the *Plessy* finding. A full-fledged assault on segregation in primary and secondary schools was underway by 1952, with five promising cases coming to the forefront.

Federal appeals culminated a year later in a hearing of the five unified school cases before the U.S. Supreme Court. Topeka's lead plaintiff, Oliver Brown, headed a docket which included *Harry Briggs, Jr.* v. *R.W. Elliott* (South Carolina), *Dorothy E. Davis* v. *County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia, Francis B. Gebhart* v. *Ethel Louise Belton* (Delaware), and *Spottswood Bolling* v. *C. Melvin Sharpe* (District of Columbia).[2] *Brown* v. *Board* gave its name to the composite case because, by circumstance, it led the docket and epitomized the basic issue of each, the denial of due process as guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution through the practice of racial segregation. After several delays, Earl Warren announced the unanimous landmark decision which overturned the *Plessy* precedent on May 17, 1954. The high court ruled that segregation violated due process granted to all citizens in the 14th Amendment because separate schools were "inherently unequal" and bestowed a sense of inferiority upon their students. After further hearings, the Court issued another unanimous opinion in May 1955 urging states to comply "with all deliberate speed."[3]

Linda Brown in front of Monroe Elementary School. Photo by Carl Iwasaki,March 1953;courtesy Life Magazine, *©Time, Inc.*

While the opportunity to eradicate inequality came through the judicial system, this national debate about desegregation included a virtual cross-section of all Americans. Jack Greenberg, former NAACP LDF Director, remarked that the school desegregation cases "helped to crystallize a national commitment to eradicate racial inequality."[4] The convergence of grassroots and federal action initiated a groundswell of responses, from those who sought equalization and integration as well as those who fought to retain the old system. Segregationists rallied quickly to oppose what they perceived as an encroachment of state and local authority by the federal government. The two camps squared off in the 1960s over the desegregation of public accommodations, housing, and interstate travel, and equality in the political process. Although the civil rights movement fragmented, many African Americans and white supporters ultimately sought the same goals—to equalize economic opportunity and fair treatment across the country.

The fundamental story of change lies in the people who initiated it, who retained the inner will and stamina to translate ideas into action and accomplishments. One must move beyond Linda and her father, therefore, to interpret a wide spectrum of people and events. History is the aggregate of past events, which occurred because of specific human action in a particular place at a certain moment. For the most part, it involves untangling a messy and intriguing mix of simultaneous actions and reactions of people driven by cross-purposes. The result is a tangle of concurrent motivations and accidental happenings which may or may not lend themselves to precise sorting and categorization. In previous generations, the historical academy often concentrated on the actions of "great men" and the neatness of past events. Scholars and history buffs, alike, raised a few to symbolic status that approached historical fiction and left the rest to timeless anonymity. While sites still initially attract visitors by regaling these cultural heroes, hopefully, they now will imbue a greater sense of the full history that such characters represent.

Brown v. Board of Education NHS illustrates this more modern approach by exploring individual issues of control and inclusion in a democracy. These events clearly illustrate democratic aspirations of African Americans in the mid-20th century, their insistence on quality education, and demand for inclusion in mainstream society. Historical figures like the Browns are extremely important, but should be viewed as compilations of events and people rather than singular entities who stood alone against society's storm. This new unit provides the opportunity to analyze a comprehensive collection of actions, policies, and feelings which denote the remarkable power of people to change their society. As a cultural resource associated with these events, Monroe School allows us to move beyond Topeka—beyond static iconography and symbolism to communicate its history of affirmation and initiative. Like a prism, this new site will display the full spectrum of history that lies beyond image and icon.

Notes

1 I wish to extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Harry Butowsky, Ron Cockrell, Bill Harlow, Dr.

Donald S. Stevens, and Mark R. Weekley for comments which sharpened many points in this essay.

2 The *Belton* case was linked with *Bulah* v. *Gebhart*, which addressed segregation in Hockessin, Delaware.

3 Because it pertained to public schools in the nation's capital, *Bolling* v. *Sharpe* received a separate ruling, which stipulated that segregation by the federal government violated the Fifth Amendment.

4 Jack Greenberg, "The Supreme Court, Civil Rights and Civil Dissonance," *The Yale Law Journal* 77 (1968): 1523.

—Rachel Franklin Weekley
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Telling the Truth

"The overall approach to historical information would be simply to tell the truth."

So read the draft General Management Plan for Brown v. Board of Education National Historical Park (NHP). The next sentence read: "Where historians and others differ on the description and interpretation of past events, visitors would have direct access to the differing perspectives." I wrote both sentences. Many people didn't like the first one.

Several reviewers objected to the direction "... to tell the truth;" several others approved. Many of those objecting called it naïve, citing the subjective nature of history, the importance of perspective, of interpretation. My first question of reviewers was whether they had read the second sentence. I wondered whether a semicolon between the two sentences would have led to better communication (reviewers might have considered both clauses before reacting to "telling the truth"). Probably not. Eventually the park (who didn't object to the phrase) rewrote the section. The same point was made, but with more clarity (albeit more length and perhaps less punch), and presumably everyone was happy. But still I wondered: why did that phrase cause such consternation? Should we not tell the truth?

Well, the obvious problem with "telling the truth" is that there are many versions. This was the reason for the second sentence, that "visitors would have direct access to the differing perspectives." But that still was inadequate for several reviewers.

It seems that history shades objective truths. History is the study of the past; what that study yields are functions of our current perspectives, attitudes, beliefs, and values, and of the evidence available. Since those variables have diverse answers from one person to another, we have multiple histories to deal with. Thus, the controversy over the interpretation of the Enola Gay exhibit by the Smithsonian Institution, the furor over national history standards, and questions about political correctness in historical interpretation.

Several years ago, I was challenged by a creationist visitor when I stated in an interpretive talk that people had come to this continent at least 10,000 years ago. I thought about how I knew that to be true, and realized that a more accurate statement would be "most anthropologists believe that people came to this continent at least 10,000 years ago." If this migration were a major theme of the talk, I might then describe the evidence for such an assertion. I might also describe the evidence for earlier and later arrivals.

Interpreters, like the general public, rely on historians, anthropologists, biologists, geologists, and other scientists and scholars to study the world and communicate their insights and the evidence for them. Yet these experts often disagree; then what is an interpreter to do? Tell the truths. Tell the public about the differing points of view, and let the public choose. Performance standards for interpreters don't include omniscience.

Are we obligated to include all points of view? Should we give equal time to theories of alien visitation to explain prehistoric migrations or remains? Hardly. While such ideas may be interesting in a tabloid sort of way, they needn't receive equal billing with scientific and scholarly insights. Interpreters must use professional judgement in identifying important, valid, and relevant perspectives. Good interpretation requires selection, culling, paring down to the most essential ideas. Yet the public is being short-changed if they always receive only one approved version of history or science.

"Facts" in any scholarly discipline are subject to revision as new information becomes available. Truths evolve; each succeeding history is revisionist history. Visitors can become empowered as they are exposed to differing interpretations and the evidence for them.

Telling the truth means not avoiding controversial issues. It includes interpreting all relevant sides, and giving visitors the evidence for each. It includes the affirmation of basic values. Of course, it's not that simple. We do editorialize by nuance, emphasis, implication, and selection.

It is also important to recognize that science and history have no monopolies on truth. Traditional and spiritual perspectives are often significant as well. At Petroglyph National Monument, the interpretation of the 17,000 images chipped and abraded on rocks may encompass at least two major perspectives: the western scientific view, and what Puebloan descendants of the petroglyph makers want visitors to know. The perspectives wouldn't be mutually exclusive; yet each is a function of a distinct world view.

At Brown v. Board of Education NHP, visitors will learn much objective and documented information: the chronology of events, the defense and plaintiff positions, the evidence of educational

inequalities, contrasting constitutional interpretations, reports of observers and participants, mitigating factors, accounts of social conditions, subsequent developments, and so on. Interpretation will also include subjective perspectives: reports, accounts, opinions, prejudices, interpretations, allegations, and conjectures. The appropriateness of including subjective perspectives will be judged in many ways, including accuracy, relevance, and completeness. That these subjective perspectives existed is the truth; that they are relevant, important and interesting will be the judgment of interpreters and designers; how to respond to them will be up to each visitor. Anchoring these perspectives will be basic precepts, including the 1954 Supreme Court decision, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

Perhaps that problematic sentence in the Brown v. Board of Education Plan should have read: "The overall approach to historical information would be simply to tell the truths."

—Sam Vaughn, Interpretive Planner, Harpers Ferry Center/Denver Service Center, National Park Service

STATE NEWS

New York State Guide to African-American Historic Resources

Under the National and State Historic Preservation Acts, the New York State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) is charged with the identification, evaluation, and protection of historic and cultural resources. Despite the inclusive nature of this mandate, resources associated with African-American history are significantly under-represented in the statewide historic resources inventory and the State and National Registers of Historic Places. Exclusion of these properties at the identification and evaluation stages makes it far less likely that they will be considered in preservation planning activities and fosters an exclusionary record of the state's history. As many of these resources are, by their nature, anonymous, rare, fragile, and threatened, devising strategies to address their identification and protection has become a critical issue in contemporary historic preservation.

To this end, the New York SHPO has formed a task force to develop initiatives to encourage African Americans to participate in state and local preservation programs and to motivate local preservationists to focus on this neglected category of resources. The task force has recently completed its first project, the *Guide to the Survey of Historic Resources Associated with African-Americans*. This guide, prepared by a team of SHPO staff and academic consultants with expertise in African-American history, is designed to provide assistance in researching, identifying, and evaluating cultural resources associated with the history of African Americans. Although to some degree aimed at an audience already familiar with the survey process, the guide is also an attempt to reach out to members of the public who have not worked with us before.

In preparing the guide, the task force explored some of the reasons why historic resources related to African-American history have been overlooked in traditional preservation activity:

• The preservation movement itself grew out of efforts to protect monuments to a national history that was written by the majority cultural group. Although our definition of history has expanded considerably in recent years, we are still feeling the effects of outdated hierarchies and limited world views. Some continue to find it difficult to recognize historic resources that are associated with other cultural groups and the everyday lives of their members.

• In the wake of Urban Renewal, the preservation movement gained great momentum through efforts to preserve highly visible architectural landmarks, threatened urban centers, and declining residential neighborhoods. The overwhelmingly visual orientation of this era skewed the focus of the profession toward architectural history, an approach that encouraged preservationists to overlook resources whose significance might be obscured by their ordinary character or revealed only by examining their meaning within the specific themes of African-American history.

• While many scholars have developed expertise about the history of traditionally underrepresented groups, efforts within academic communities to identify and protect specific properties associated with these groups have lagged.

• Some have been uncomfortable with preserving resources that represent less than noble aspects of the past, such as resources that recall the oppression of one race by another.

In addition to the subtle effects of this "baggage," many problems of exclusion and omission can be attributed simply to oversight and unfamiliarity. Thus, rather than reinventing the survey process, the new guide attempts to redirect surveyors toward a more inclusive view of local history and supplements rather than replaces the survey guidance developed by the National Park Service. The guide contains general information about the survey program, advice about community participation, a methodology for carrying out historic resources surveys, case studies that illustrate specific issues, a list of major themes and contexts for this subject area, and a bibliography.

The heart of the survey guide is the methodology. This methodology itself is not new. The standard survey methodology published by the National Park Service in *National Register Bulletin 24: Guidelines for Local Surveys* outlines appropriate research